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REAL CONDITIONS IN THE CONGO FREE STATE.

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THE article by Mr. Demetrius C. Boulger, which appeared in the *NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* for December, confined itself so closely to the juristic and diplomatic aspects of the Congo question, and dealt with them in a spirit so lenient toward the management of Congo affairs, that, in view of this attempted defence, it would almost seem an injustice not to call attention to the conditions actually existing in the Congo Free State, as far as they appear from documentary evidence and from the unanimous testimony of eye-witnesses.

The policy of exploiting the natural wealth of the vast territories of the Congo Free State primarily for the benefit of the government itself—of the sovereign and his associates—has developed with constantly increasing force during the last decade. As early as 1885, when the Congo State declared, by the decree of the first of July, that all unoccupied land would be considered as belonging to the State, the main tendency of the exploitative policy of the Congo State authorities was already foreshadowed. The peculiar conclusions from this principle of state occupation were not drawn until after 1890, when the Brussels Conference had given the Congo State the right to impose a tax on imports, and had thus rendered it practically self-sufficing and independent of the good-will of European nations. In 1891, a decree was issued by the government to the commissioner of the Uelle district, directing him to secure all the domanial products for the State. As a result, the natives of the vast region occupied as public domain were forbidden to sell the rubber or ivory which they had gathered, to any but the State officials, while merchants

purchasing these articles were treated as having received stolen goods. In other words, the natives, who had by immemorial custom gathered the products of the forests from the unoccupied lands, were suddenly deprived of this right; and private commerce, which had by many sacrifices and at heavy expense established trade relations and trade routes, was declared illegal, indeed criminal, by a stroke of the pen.

The decree of October 30th, 1892, divided the State into three approximately equal zones. The northern third of the State constitutes the *domaine privé* of the State, within which the State is absolutely the sole proprietor and merchant. The second or southeast zone is the field of operation of the Katanga Company, in all the profits of which the State takes a share of two-thirds; in this zone, private acquisition of land and private commerce were forbidden until ordinances respecting these matters should be made, and such ordinances have not as yet been issued. The third or southwest zone, comprising the basin of the Kassai River, was nominally left open to private enterprise; but a license fee of 5,000 francs for every trading station, and a toll of one-fifth of all rubber gathered, are exactions which did not prove encouraging to private commerce. Still, fourteen Belgian companies operated for a time in the southern part of this zone. These fourteen companies were in 1901 consolidated into a large trust, the Kassai Company, in which the State owns one-half of the stock, the other half being distributed among the private companies. The latter no longer carry on commerce on their own account, the Kassai Company enjoying the exclusive privilege of exporting the forest products. In all really important companies which carry on the exploitation of the Congo, the State is interested, either as a large stockholder, or through a right to share the profits of the undertaking. The situation, therefore, reduces itself in fact to this: that the State exploits the natural resources of the Congo, either directly through its officials, or through Belgian companies in which it has large interests or in the profits of which it shares. That the sale of land to private individuals is not encouraged is apparent from the almost prohibitive price put on all the land, and from the fact that throughout two of the zones, and in one-half of the third, land will not be sold at all. The total income from the sale of lands in 1901 was only \$14,000.

To argue that a situation such as this does not constitute an

interference with private commerce, manifests a total disregard of all facts, in consideration of the specious legal pretext that the State has a right to assume full property in, and control over, the million of square miles comprised in the Congo State, and to establish an *a priori* right to all the products thereof. Articles One and Two of the Berlin Congo Act of 1885, by which, though the Congo State may already have been established, its continued existence was made possible, provide that the commerce of all nations shall enjoy perfect freedom, and that none of the Powers that exercise sovereign rights in the Congo region shall there establish monopolies or privileges of any kind which relate to commerce. As the only export commerce that has ever existed in this region is the commerce in forest products, any legislation which restricts and virtually annihilates this commerce as far as private individuals and companies are concerned, certainly comes most directly within purview of the prohibition. That the British government, whose subjects were the first pioneers in exploration and commerce along the Congo, has a perfect right, nay, is in duty bound, to protest against this régime will hardly be denied by any one who is not blinded by quasi-legal forms. Mr. Boulger says: "I find the proportion of the British trade to the whole is about one-sixth, the same as in 1891." As a matter of fact, in 1902 out of a total commerce of 73,500,000 francs, Belgium enjoyed 63,700,000, while Great Britain had the paltry sum of 2,600,000, or about one-thirtieth of the whole.

We are told that "the flourishing condition of the finances and commerce of the Congo State is the crowning proof that it enjoys internal peace and prosperity." The inconsequence of this statement will become apparent at once if we analyze the actual figures of Congolese commerce and finance. In 1901, the exports were as follows, in francs:

| | | | |
|-----------------|------------|---------------|--------|
| Rubber | 43,965,000 | Hides | 5,000 |
| Ivory | 3,964,000 | Cocoa | 6,000 |
| Palm Nuts | 1,372,000 | Tobacco | 1,000 |
| Palm Oil | 802,000 | Coffee | 61,000 |

It will be seen from this table that, outside of rubber and ivory, the export of which is practically monopolized by the State and by a few favorite companies, the total export of products from this vast empire—in itself as large as all of the United States east of Illinois—was but little more than 2,000,000 francs or

\$400,000. Eighteen years of "material regeneration" have resulted in the export of a few thousand dollars worth of cocoa and coffee,—indeed a magnificent result. When we compare these figures with those of the neighboring colony of Kamerun, under a much-maligned German administration, a colony only about one-fifth as large as the Free State, we find that its exports of palm products and cocoa amount to 4,000,000 francs a year.

The imports of the Congo Free State amount to only 23,000,000 francs, or less than one-half of its exports,—a situation unprecedented in any European colony, and of itself indicating the rate at which the natural wealth of this territory is being drawn out. Among the expenses of the Congo Free State, we find the item of 7,700,000 francs for the public force, and 1,000,000 francs for public works. None of all these figures requires any commentary. Far too clearly to be concealed by any humanitarian manifestoes, they prove the true inwardness of the economic policy now employed in the Congo State by its agents under the direction of its exalted founder and sovereign. The lamentable consequences of this policy upon the condition of the natives have been attested unanimously by so many trustworthy witnesses, that it is no longer possible for the government to deny their existence. It is, therefore, now urged by the defenders of the Congo administration, with a cynic smile, "that we are all of us sinners," and that British, French, and German occupation of Africa has led to many instances of cruel treatment. No matter how true this is—and unfortunately the frequency of inhuman acts against the blacks cannot be denied by any nation—it is totally beside the point in this discussion; for, whatever the "admirable native code" of the Congo Free State may say, the economic system of the government itself puts a premium upon the exploitation and enslavement of the natives. The commissioners of the government have been instructed "to devote all their energies to the harvesting of rubber, and to proceed as far as possible by persuasion, rather than by force." The latter clause is, presumably, a part of the admirable code for the protection of the natives. The fact that the government officials are employed for commercial purposes indicates, of itself, that the Congo Free State is not a true political government, but a huge trade monopoly. It is one of the first principles of colonial government, as applied by civilized nations, that the public officers

should have nothing to do with commerce. In their work of procuring rubber and ivory for the government, the commissioners in the Congo State are assisted by the "public force," an army of natives, bloodthirsty, tyrannous, with the instincts of cannibals. These armed representatives of public order are let loose upon the native population to teach them the dignity of labor, and to initiate them into the beatitude of civilized life. The natives are forced not only to pay a heavy tax in forest products, but also to bring to the government depots a certain fixed amount of rubber every month. The admirable native code of the Congo Free State provides that the natives shall be paid liberally for their work. The payment, in fact, is five cents a pound, when the market price of rubber is as high as one dollar. No wonder that the finances of the Congo Free State are in a flourishing condition. If the quantity of rubber demanded is not promptly forthcoming, the uniformed savages of the State are directed to apply moral suasion to the delinquent villages. In order to give satisfactory proof that their duty had been conscientiously carried out, they have been wont to return to the commissioner the smoked and dried hands of men and children, which served as vouchers to the officials. That whole populations were driven in terror to take refuge in the distant bush, or that, according to the report of the former governor of the French Congo, 30,000 natives at one time sought safety across the frontier, is not, therefore, a matter of surprise. While, on account of the aroused European opinion, the government has attempted to restrain some of the worst abuses, and while among their agents there may be many who attempt to give the natives some kind of protection, it is evident that the latter must continue to suffer terribly as long as a system continues which makes it part of the duty of officials and soldiers to extort the largest possible amount of rubber and ivory.

"How is it possible," it will be asked, "that such conditions are tolerated by the Belgian nation?" The Congo system, it is true, has not escaped criticism in the Belgian Parliament, as is apparent from the following expressions taken from a debate in 1901:

"We are adversaries of the capitalist colonial policy which entails exploitation, theft, and assassination. The Congo Free State has introduced forced labor, tribute in kind, and a forced twelve-year military service. We protest against this disguised form of slavery." "Remember the thirteen hundred severed hands."

The reason why a system with such undoubted abuses has been able to maintain itself, must be looked for in the high profits obtained by the companies which are exploiting the Congo under the direction of the government. In 1901, a dividend of 900 francs per share was declared by the Abir Company, or ninety per cent. on the face value of the stock, which was at one time worth twenty-five times its par value or one hundred and twenty-five times the capital actually paid in. The profits of the *Société Anversoise du Commerce au Congo* in two years amounted to four times its nominal capital. Dividends such as these are calculated to make men optimistic and tolerant. A government that can produce such results must be eminently successful; its work is indeed that of humanity and progress. The current reports of cruelty, bloodshed and enslavement are evidently due to the insinuations of jealous rivals! As the objections to the Congo monopoly come from British and German traders, who are most directly concerned, the political antipathies of Europe are allowed to enter, and the representations of the British government are interpreted purely upon this basis. We are thus in danger of having the Turkish situation over again; a native population subjected to inhuman treatment because the European nations, on account of their mutual jealousies, cannot deal effectively with the question.

That the policy of economic exploitation now employed by the Congo government is not calculated to lay the foundations of a lasting economic system is only too evident, when the facts are considered. The large demands made upon the natives for rubber necessitate the profuse bleeding of productive vines, and, consequently, their rapid destruction in ever-increasing areas. The immense profits of this exhaustive exploitation cannot conceal its ruinous nature. Even now, millions of hectares along the main rivers have been utterly devastated for the time being, and the Congo State is seeking to reach new territories by constructing, in company with a large corporation, a railway from the Congo to the Great Lakes. May that divinity which is so often invoked in the process of moral and material regeneration have mercy upon the natives of these territories about to be opened; for, from the savage levies of the Congo Free State, they have as little to expect as from the Arab slave raiders!

PAUL S. REINSCH.